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On Interviews

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On Interviews

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Obrist, Hans Ulrich. *Conversations : vol. I*, Paris : Manuella, 2008

Alvaro Siza : *une question de mesure*, Paris : Le Moniteur, 2008

Talking Art: interviews with artists since 1976, Londres : Art Monthly : Ridinghouse, 2007

- 1 “The interview”, notes Walter Benjamin in his “Conversation with Gide”, “that form that has been adopted by diplomats, financiers and film people, does not, at first glance, form the terrain where one will discover what is most unusual about and specific to living writers. But on closer inspection, things are different. Dialogue, like a stroke of light, reveals Gidean thinking”.¹ Written 80 years ago, these lines turn out to be remarkably topical. In them we find, on the one hand, the disparaging dimension peculiar to the prejudice aimed at discrediting the interview genre, as well as the clear foresight of a philosopher who managed to negotiate that accepted idea, and acknowledge the “revelatory” scope of dialogue. When assimilated by art criticism, the interview actually still turns out, today, to be synonymous with circumspection among certain historians. But without attesting to any absolute rejection, like the regular and frequent use made of it by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. How are we to explain this reservation ? The restrictive closeness with the object of study introduced by the interview accounts for a lot. Just like its unpredictable character. And yet which contemporary art historian could downplay the contribution of the countless interviews of such as Gerhard Richter or Francis Bacon, in conversation with David Sylvester, Hollis Frampton with Carl Andre, Christian Boltanski with Catherine Grenier, various conceptual artists with Patricia Norvell, or Donald Judd and Frank Stella with Bruce Glaser?
- 2 The interview is special in this respect : it overlaps word and thought in an exercise where pentimento and distance, and control and meaning of priorities, are rendered

vulnerable by its inter-subjective perspective. In eluding the interviewee's hold, the course of the interview is actually mainly, but not exclusively, steered by the interviewer, this latter being able, turn by turn, not to say simultaneously, to don the garb—to borrow analogies proposed by Iwona Blazwick²—of the detective, the prosecutor or the psychoanalyst. As Louis Marin writes, lastly, the interview is a “discourse perforce at risk of drift or in danger of improvisation, because another “gives” it with the self, and because a part if not all of it that is uttered will be so in the form of replies provoked by a question, of which neither of the two parties involved is truly master”.³

- 3 The interview can call on various methods and configurations, because it may be “centrifugal” or “centripetal”. In the first instance, the interviewer adopts a low profile, holding back so as to be attuned to his interlocutor, “accompanying” him or her in the musical sense of the term. Whereas in the second instance, the interviewer tries on the contrary to draw the interviewee towards him, the best interviews obviously being those which convey a balance between these two complementary dynamics. A selection of recently published books helps us to gauge the wide range offered by this genre. First off, let us mention its monographic ramification, like Catherine Geel's interviews with Pierre Paulin, where the designer, nearing the end of his career, casts a lucid and painstaking eye over his work, while at the same time analyzing the changes in a profession where he was one of the most representative leading lights, as well as observers. More ambitious, volume-wise, the interviews of Alvaro Siza with Dominique Machabert and Laurent Beaudouin, spanning over close on thirty years (from 1977 to 2005), emphasize the coherence of the architect's career, the lucidity of his approach and his very pragmatic way of thinking about the city—the other's way of looking at things, marked in Machabert's case by a thoroughly avowed dilettantism, broadly contributing to the generosity of the person who agreed to yield himself to “any old body” (“I mean to myself, no art critic, expert in nothing, and not even an architect, either”⁴).
- 4 We still have to bring in the key to our brief foray into this genre, namely the first volume of the *Conversations* of the iconic Hans Ulrich Obrist. Conveying the compulsive thirst and insatiable curiosity of a critic and exhibition curator who never shrinks from straying from well-trodden paths of contemporary art to plunge into alternative areas of creation, these *Conversations* nurture a network whose epicentre is none other than Hans Ulrich Obrist himself. For it is indeed the construction of a work that the reader witnesses as he proceeds into this doorstep of more than 900 dense pages. His way of linking up his different interviews, and ushering in unlikely comparisons (Jamel Debbouze and Eric Hobsbawm !), his way of organizing his ideas around “laboratory situations”, hypotheses and interdisciplinary hunches, and projects never done, and finally the almost obsessive recourse to certain themes that are important to him (museums, architecture, relations with spectators, utopias) show that *his* conversations stem from a praxis that is, when all is said and done, egocentric. The interview with Hans-Georg Gadamer turns out, in this respect, to reveal the undertaking set up by the critic. “When you dialogue with somebody”, says the philosopher, “you are always in a movement. The other completes your discourse by an answer”.⁵ Hans Ulrich Obrist has thoroughly understood how this movement works.

NOTES

1. Benjamin, Walter. 'Conversation avec Gide' (1928) in *Œuvres II*, Paris : Gallimard, 2000, (Folio), p. 31
2. Blazwick, Iwona. 'An anatomy of the interview' in: Bickers, Patricia, Wilson, Andrew (eds.). *Talking Art Interviews with artists since 1976*, London: Art Monthly; Ridinghouse, 2007. This engaging book borrows some sixty interviews with artists, as well as art critics and historians published by the magazine *Art Monthly* between 1976 and 2007.
3. Marin, Louis. *De l'entretien*, Paris : Minuit, 1997, pp. 11-12
4. Machabert, Dominique. 'Transcriptions' in : *Une question de mesure : entretiens avec Alvaro Siza* by Dominique Machabert and Laurent Beaudouin, Paris : Le Moniteur, 2008, (Architecture), p. 7
5. Gadamer, Hans-Georg. Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist in *Conversations*, Paris: Manuella, 2008, p. 276